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ABROAD AT HOME

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War Is Peace

CORRUPTION of the language was central to Orwell's terrifying vision in "1984." Words had come to mean their opposite. The language of the state was Newspeak. The official slogans were War Is Peace, Freedom Is Slavery, Ignorance Is Strength.

President Reagan on the subject of Nicaragua sounds more and more these days like something from the pages of Orwell. His disregard for facts has become hallucinatory. His rhetoric rings with hate. Anyone who disagrees with his Truth is an agent of the enemy.

Under the slogan of peace Mr. Reagan asks Congress to legitimize war. The legislation he seeks would give him authority to support "military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua," and he would use it for arms after 60 days if the Government of Nicaragua had not agreed to the contras' terms.

He wants "humanitarian aid" for the contras, Mr. Reagan says. But a top-secret Administration memorandum to Congressional appropriations committees says the real policy is to expand the contra forces and increase their military pressure on Nicaragua. The memorandum also says that "direct application of U.S. military force" is ruled out now but "must realistically be recognized as an eventual option."

Mr. Reagan and his aides claim support for his plan from Latin leaders, especially the Contadora countries. But reports from the region tell of alarm at the President's linking the idea of a cease-fire and peace talks with authority for renewed military support of the contras. The reports also speak of a feeling among leaders that the Reagan Administration manipulated them by concealing that link.

President Belisario Betancur of Colombia, a key player in the Contadora peace effort, at first spoke favorably of the Reagan plan. This week he said Mr. Reagan had not told him it included aid to the contras. That link, he said, made it "no longer a peace proposal but a preparation for war."

The Orwellian character of Mr. Reagan's approach was strikingly, though perhaps inadvertently, indicated by the House minority leader, Robert Michel. He said he hoped to amend the language now due to come up for a vote, which would authorize military aid to the contras, because members were telling him "We're voting for something I'm not for and taking the President's word that it really means something else."

A vote against his proposal, Mr. Reagan warned Congress, would be "literally a vote against peace." It would be a vote against the Contadora countries, he added. He said Pope John Paul II had urged "us to continue our efforts in Central America." But an assistant said later that he had not meant to suggest Papal endorsement of his plan for aid to the contras.

One of Orwell's striking images in "1984" was of the two-minute hate sessions in which citizens had to engage. Mr. Reagan's comments on the Sandinistas lately have taken on their tone.

"Somoza was bad," he said the other night, but "the Sandinistas are infinitely worse." There are no words adequate to convey the insult that statement does to history and to the victims of 40 years of Somoza pillage.

The Nicaraguan Government is "a Communist dictatorship," he said. It has "expunged the political opposition." That of a country where opposition parties hold a third of the seats in Parliament, where private business is active and critical, where the press is wrongly censored but a privately owned opposition newspaper survives. Does Mr. Reagan think those things exist in the Soviet Union?

Disregard for history is a familiar Reagan quality. What other President could have thought that a visit to a German cemetery including graves of the SS men who administered the Final Solution would be balanced by visiting a former concentration camp?

But there is a special edge, a virulence to his comments on Nicaragua. It is as if he cannot bear the complicated, ragged reality of that country today but must have a pure Communist enemy.

The end of destroying that villainous enemy then justifies any means. And so we see the President of the United States charging that the honorable lawyers and human rights specialists who meticulously traced terrorist actions by the contras were "bought and paid for by the Sandinistas." It could have been said by Joe McCarthy.

The tactics of fear are aimed at Congress. The answer should be not a partisan but an institutional one: We do not give any President a blank check for war.